

## Community resources

[Follow us on Twitter](#) [Check our Reddit](#) [Twitter this](#) [Digg this](#) [page](#) [Contact us on IRC](#)

*courage is contagious*

## Viewing cable 06MOSCOW5740, RUSSIA: PRESIDENTIAL SUCCESSION SNAPSHOT

If you are new to these pages, please read an introduction on the [structure of a cable](#) as well as how to [discuss them](#) with others. See also the [FAQs](#)

### Understanding cables

Every cable message consists of three parts:

- The top box shows each cable's unique reference number, when and by whom it originally was sent, and what its initial classification was.
- The middle box contains the header information that is associated with the cable. It includes information about the receiver(s) as well as a general subject.
- The bottom box presents the body of the cable. The opening can contain a more specific subject, references to other cables ([browse by origin](#) to find them) or additional comment. This is followed by the main contents of the cable: a summary, a collection of specific topics and a comment section.

To understand the justification used for the classification of each cable, please use this [WikiSource](#) article as reference.

### Discussing cables

If you find meaningful or important information in a cable, please link directly to its unique reference number. Linking to a specific paragraph in the body of a cable is also possible by copying the appropriate link (to be found at the paragraph symbol). Please mark messages for social networking services like Twitter with the hash tags **#cablegate** and a hash containing the reference ID e.g. **#06MOSCOW5740**.

Reference ID	Created	Released	Classification	Origin
06MOSCOW5740	2006-05-31 13:15	2011-08-30 01:44	CONFIDENTIAL	Embassy Moscow

Appears in these articles:

<http://www.novgaz.ru/data/2011/001/16.html>

VZCZCXRO3110  
RR RUEHDBU  
DE RUEHMO #5740/01 1511315  
ZNY CCCCC ZZH  
R 311315Z MAY 06  
FM AMEMBASSY MOSCOW  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 6749  
INFO RUCNCIS/CIS COLLECTIVE  
RUEHDX/MOSCOW POLITICAL COLLECTIVE

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 05 MOSCOW 005740

SIPDIS

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 05/19/2016  
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [ECON](#) [PINR](#) [RS](#)  
SUBJECT: RUSSIA: PRESIDENTIAL SUCCESSION SNAPSHOT

REF: A. 2005 MOSCOW 14734  
[1](#)B. MOSCOW 5000  
[1](#)C. MOSCOW 3335

Classified By: Minister-Counselor for Political Affairs Kirk Augustine.  
Reasons: 1.4 (B/D).

[1](#)1. (C) SUMMARY. Adding fuel to already intense speculation about who will succeed him, President Putin confirmed to state media May 13 that he will endorse a candidate before the March 2008 election. Both Kremlin-connected and independent analysts believe Putin's choice will be driven by a desire to ensure his physical and financial security, to maximize the likelihood of continuity in his policies, and to preserve the current political system, in which he is the final arbiter of disputes among rival groups (a role he likely intends to play even after leaving office). Our contacts generally think Putin will consult about possible successors with his closest advisers but make the final decision alone, without involving elites outside the Kremlin or relying heavily on public opinion surveys, as former President Boris Yeltsin did. The conventional wisdom remains that First Deputy Prime Minister Dmitriy Medvedev and Deputy Prime Minister/Defense Minister Sergey Ivanov are the two front-runners, but other horses of varying shades of darkness are believed to be at least potentially in the running. Putin's interest lies in prolonging uncertainty to avoid a premature slippage of power away from him and toward a perceived successor, but that uncertainty encourages competitive jockeying for position among the candidates and a feeding-frenzy among those who fear their snouts could soon be torn from the trough. END SUMMARY.

.  
HELPING RUSSIA BY HELPING HIMSELF  
-----

[1](#)2. (C) Most of our contacts take for granted that Putin's own physical and financial security and social status post-2008 loom large in his succession calculations. XXXXXXXXXXXX told us that financial considerations would drive Putin's thinking. XXXXXXXXXXXX agreed, describing the Russian presidency as a business and saying that Putin's decision on a successor would be based on his sense of who would best be able to protect the wealth he and his associates had acquired. Equally important to Putin, according to XXXXXXXXXXXX, is preserving the elite-based political system in which ad hoc interest groups vie for political clout and control over economic resources, with Putin as the ultimate arbiter. XXXXXXXXXXXX said Putin feared the system would collapse without him at its center, and therefore intended to remain active behind the scenes while leaving

day-to-day governance to his successor. XXXXXXXXXXXX agreed, saying that preserving the current balance of power among competing elite groups was of great importance to Putin.

13. (C) XXXXXXXXXXXX told us that Putin needs to choose a strong successor who is not beholden to any one group and who has already amassed a personal fortune during Putin's tenure. Such a figure, XXXXXXXXXXXX explained, would have a vested interest in maintaining the status quo in order to protect his own wealth and standing. XXXXXXXXXXXX disagreed, arguing that a strong successor would inevitably side with one group or another, and succumb to the temptation to crush his rivals. Such a turn of events would not only disrupt the precarious balance of clans and lead to a redistribution of assets, but also undermine Putin's role as arbiter of the competing groups. XXXXXXXXXXXX offered another perspective, saying that a succession candidate's "strength" or "weakness" would be of only secondary interest to Putin; the overriding criterion would be loyalty to Putin personally.

.  
PUTIN LISTENING, BUT WILL DECIDE ALONE  
-----

14. (C) Many of our contacts believe that, having weakened all his potential rivals and atomized the elite, Putin will be able to make the choice of his successor alone, without needing to consult extensively with political and economic elites to ensure their support. XXXXXXXXXXXX expects Putin to discuss the issue informally with his closest advisers, but to reveal his final decision to them only shortly before going public, in order to maintain strict secrecy. The broader elite and the general public would learn of Putin's decision simultaneously. XXXXXXXXXXXX concurred, saying Putin would consult only a handful of close advisers, including Medvedev, Sergey Ivanov, and Deputy PA head Igor Sechin. XXXXXXXXXXXX expected that on questions of succession, Sechin's opinion would carry more weight than Medvedev's or Ivanov's, because Putin would consider that as possible successors, the latter two could not give disinterested advice.

15. (C) Asked whether Putin, by not consulting more broadly, would not risk alienating those whose financial resources and media outlets would be central to ensuring a smooth succession, XXXXXXXXXXXX predicted that the elites, on hearing the name of Putin's preferred successor, would fight each other to be first to pledge allegiance to his choice. If elite opinion mattered to Putin, XXXXXXXXXXXX added pointedly, former Yukos CEO Mikhail Khodorkovskiy would still be free. Instead, XXXXXXXXXXXX said, Putin was confident elites have learned from the Khodorkovskiy case the severe consequences of defying the Kremlin. XXXXXXXXXXXX agreed, saying that despite real divisions within the elite, there remains a profound corporate interest in maintaining the existing contours of political and economic power, and that can best be done by falling in line behind Putin's choice, whoever it may be.

16. (C) Given how extensively former President Yeltsin's team used public opinion polls to identify an electable successor, many have assumed Putin would do the same. XXXXXXXXXXXX, however, told us the Kremlin would not poll to determine what qualities the public wants to see in Russia's next president, since the results would be meaningless: respondents in such a poll would simply describe Putin when asked what their ideal president would be like -- reversing the pattern from 1999, when respondents listed as desirable qualities those that the deeply unpopular Yeltsin lacked. XXXXXXXXXXXX also argued that the Kremlin's control over major media outlets would not be sufficient in itself to build a mass following for a presidential candidate -- the key to winning public support would be to find a way to "resonate with the public," as Putin did when he gave an emotional speech in September 1999 in response to a series of apartment bombings that had terrorized the population. Until that point, XXXXXXXXXXXX said, even daily television coverage had only modestly improved Putin's popularity rating.

17. (C) XXXXXXXXXXXX and XXXXXXXXXXXX disagreed, arguing that the Kremlin has sufficient administrative and media resources to ensure that the public votes "correctly" in 2008. Taking a different tack, XXXXXXXXXXXX told us public opinion could be an important variable if the electorate were actively engaged, but he did not expect it to be mobilized for this election. Voters -- like the elites -- would primarily be interested, XXXXXXXXXXXX thought, in maintaining the higher standard of living they have attained under Putin, and would see Putin's chosen successor as the best available insurance policy.

FIVE WHO ARE THOUGHT TO BE ALIVE  
-----

18. (C) Upwards of thirty names have appeared in the Russian press as possible successors to Putin, but XXXXXXXXXXXX told us she believes Putin has now narrowed the field to five: First Deputy Prime Minister Dmitriy Medvedev, Deputy Prime Minister/Defense Minister Sergey Ivanov, Presidential Administration (PA) head Sergey Sobyenin, Russian Railways CEO Vladimir Yakunin, and head of the Government apparatus Sergey Naryshkin. Nearly all analysts see Medvedev and Ivanov as the clear front-runners at this stage, and most of our contacts describe Sobyenin, Yakunin, and Naryshkin as at best "reserve" candidates. XXXXXXXXXXXX dismissed the theory that Putin was using Medvedev and Ivanov as "red herrings" to distract attention from the "real," as yet unidentified, successor, saying that Putin is serious about making Medvedev or Ivanov Russia's next president. XXXXXXXXXXXX concurred, noting that Putin has nothing to gain by choosing a less-familiar figure to succeed him. Those seeing the succession as a two-horse race are divided as to whether Putin will endorse Medvedev or Ivanov, with XXXXXXXXXXXX positing a "power-sharing" scenario in which one would serve as president and the other as prime minister.

Medvedev

¶9. (C) Medvedev's long-standing loyalty to Putin, his administrative skills, his propensity for hard work, and his potential to benefit if the "national projects" that he supervises are successful are among his qualifications for the presidency. XXXXXXXXXXXX told us that Medvedev would respect Putin's wishes and work to maintain the existing balance among rival elite groups, which would make his selection acceptable to all key power elements. XXXXXXXXXXXX also said Medvedev's administrative skills were widely underestimated. Citing his Kremlin contacts, XXXXXXXXXXXX said the PA had run more efficiently under Medvedev than now under Sobyenin. XXXXXXXXXXXX, who said Medvedev was his own choice for president, described him as dedicated, hardworking, and skilled in management. (NOTE: In addition to his duties as First Deputy Prime Minister, Medvedev directs the implementation of the national projects, is chairman of the board of Gazprom, is responsible for coordinating Russia's response to avian flu, and since mid-May has chaired a government commission on bringing digital television to Russia. END NOTE.)

¶10. (C) Medvedev nonetheless has challenges to overcome. XXXXXXXXXXXX told us Medvedev does not come across as "presidential" on television or in public, although she noted that he has nearly two years to strengthen his image. The camp of PA Deputy Head Igor Sechin, which is still trying to convince Putin to remain in office beyond 2008, poses another challenge to Medvedev. XXXXXXXXXXXX said Sechin's camp is trying to discredit both Medvedev and Ivanov in order to convince Putin to seek a third term. According to XXXXXXXXXXXX, Medvedev lost a recent battle when Fradkov (who is allied with Sechin) was given control of the Customs Service, which had previously been subordinated to Medvedev's frequent ally, Minister of Economic Development and Trade German Gref.

Sergey Ivanov

¶11. (C) Ivanov has Putin's trust, is widely regarded as a patriot and pragmatist, comes across as presidential, and has proven politically resilient in the face of recurrent criticism, including from within the military establishment. XXXXXXXXXXXX said Ivanov is regarded as a more effective administrator and bureaucratic player than Medvedev. XXXXXXXXXXXX said Ivanov had demonstrated his ability to weather political attacks over the last year, as his popularity rating had not been affected by the Sechin camp's efforts to tarnish his image by exploiting cases of military hazing, using the Main Military Prosecutor to highlight the high rate of crime in the armed forces, and publicizing the fact that Ivanov's son had run over and killed an elderly pedestrian. XXXXXXXXXXXX told us that Putin's May 10 address to the legislature gave Ivanov a boost by highlighting improvements in military capability, innovation, and morale.

¶12. (C) Our contacts note that Putin and others could perceive some of Ivanov's strengths as weaknesses. For instance, while many say that Ivanov is not corrupt (at least in relative terms), some of Putin's close advisers reportedly see that as a threat, since they do not know how to "do business" with such a person. XXXXXXXXXXXX said Putin may also see Ivanov's leadership skills as a potential threat to the balance of forces among elites, and potentially to Putin's own continued influence.

Yakunin

¶13. (C) Putin probably considers Vladimir Yakunin's long-standing friendship and business experience his best qualifications for the presidency, according to our contacts. Yakunin shares Putin's KGB background, and they first met in the 1990s in St. Petersburg. Yakunin has thus far generally avoided the public spotlight, and (according to a close supporter) hopes Medvedev and Ivanov will fall short of Putin's expectations in the run-up to 2008 (ref A). Our contacts generally consider Yakunin a fallback candidate who would probably remain loyal to Putin after taking office, but could have difficulty forging ties with the political and economic elites and the general public. XXXXXXXXXXXX said Yakunin was "too exotic and strange" to become president, citing Yakunin's close and secretive relationship with the hierarchy of the Russian Orthodox Church, his reported ties to Fidel Castro and Lyndon Larouche, and his involvement in organizations like the Center for the National Glory of Russia. XXXXXXXXXXXX agreed, saying Yakunin was generally seen as an "outsider" in the elite, notwithstanding his ties to Putin.

Sobyenin

¶14. (C) Sobyenin is thought by some to be a potential successor because of his loyalty to Putin and apparent lack of ambition. He recently visited London at Putin's direction, providing the beginnings of an international profile. In XXXXXXXXXXXX's view, Putin could feel confident that Sobyenin, if elected, would continue to defer to him. XXXXXXXXXXXX said Sobyenin's lack of ambition was one reason Putin had felt comfortable bringing him into the PA. (Note. The basis for the judgment by XXXXXXXXXXXX and XXXXXXXXXXXX that Sobyenin lacks ambition, rather than has veiled ambition, is not clear. End Note) Among Sobyenin's liabilities, according to XXXXXXXXXXXX, was that he is "one-dimensional" and comfortable only when dealing with regional affairs. XXXXXXXXXXXX noted that Sobyenin lacks a public platform that would help him build support among voters and, despite a good reputation as governor of Tyumen, he was proving an ineffective manager in the PA. XXXXXXXXXXXX told us Sobyenin had been charged with overseeing the drafting of the annual state of the nation address that Putin had presented May 10, but Putin had been so dissatisfied with the early drafts that he took over the speechwriting process himself. Others have painted Sobyenin's role in the production of the speech in more positive terms. XXXXXXXXXXXX thought Putin would not be comfortable making Sobyenin president, given their relatively brief connection.

Naryshkin

¶15. (C) Sergey Naryshkin's name has recently begun surfacing with greater frequency in the media and in conversations with our contacts (ref B), but he continues to be regarded as at best a long-shot for president. XXXXXXXXXXXX said Naryshkin, who worked with Putin in the KGB, is a junior partner to Fradkov, who has used him to attack Gref and Minister of Finance Aleksey Kudrin. XXXXXXXXXXXX said Naryshkin dutifully follows instructions from Putin and Fradkov in the hope of becoming Putin's successor, or at least to be Minister of Economic Development and Trade in the next president's administration. XXXXXXXXXXXX described Naryshkin as an "interesting" figure and cautioned against underestimating his chances. XXXXXXXXXXXX agreed, saying that Naryshkin is a capable, detail-oriented official whose loyalty to Putin is undisputed.

.  
COMMENT  
-----

¶16. (C) XXXXXXXXXXXX's list of five "live" candidates is not, in our judgment, definitive. Given Putin's tendency to make surprise personnel decisions and the unforeseeable political issues that could arise before March 2008, other potential successors may emerge. Moreover, although we believe Putin does plan to leave office in 2008, that is at most a present intention. If as 2008 approaches he is not persuaded of the viability of any of the succession candidates, particularly if it appears that Russia will face difficult domestic or international circumstances, Putin could still decide to remain in power, and would likely have little trouble in arranging to do so. XXXXXXXXXXXX told us a third-term scenario was still on the table in the Kremlin, although only as a fall-back option.

¶17. (C) Our expectation, however, remains that Putin will step out of the Presidency in 2008. We concur that, in choosing the person he wants to succeed him, he will be motivated to protect his wealth and security (e.g., from prosecution) and to ensure his continuing political influence and social status after leaving office. We believe he will also reject any succession candidate who he suspects might steer Russia away from his policy "legacy." Those factors suggest he will choose a successor in whom he has a high degree of personal and political trust and who he sees as at least competent as an administrator and politician. We share the judgment that he has a relatively free hand in his choice, with the political class and broader public ready, at least initially, to defer to his judgment within broad limits.

¶18. (C) Views differ on how involved Putin plans to be in day-to-day governance after 2008. Unlike Yeltsin in 2000, Putin will leave office at a relatively young age, in good health and with very high public support. If he wants a highly operational "behind-the-scenes" role, that could incline him to opt for a successor whom he saw as easy to control. If he envisions, on the other hand, a "stand-back" post-2008 role in which he would engage only on strategic issues (a la Deng Xiaoping, a model that our counterparts in the Chinese Embassy claim to find germane), that could be reflected in a choice of a more dynamic and capable successor expected to act with substantial autonomy. Obviously, the degree to which any successor -- having won popular election and received at least the externalities of power -- would long be content to administer day-to-day affairs while allowing Putin to direct the real course of policy from behind the scenes is open to question.

¶19. (C) We also agree that last fall's appointments of Medvedev and Sergey Ivanov to the government put them in front-runner positions. While some (XXXXXXXXXXXX) argue that Medvedev is likely to get the nod for the presidency with Sergey Ivanov as his prime minister, we do not see compelling evidence for that conclusion. An at least equally strong argument, we believe, could be made in favor of Sergey Ivanov as president and Medvedev as prime minister, given Putin's demonstrated trust in Ivanov and the likelihood that, in a world seen to be full of external challenges to Russia, a "silovik" with experience in the KGB/FSB, as head of the Security Council, and as Defense Minister and manager of the

MOSCOW 00005740 005 OF 005

military-industrial complex would be seen as best prepared and most credible as head of state.

¶20. (C) Putin's present interest lies in leaving such issues unresolved, to prevent the initiation of a shift of power away from him and towards any perceived successor. The uncertainty that is beneficial to him, however, feeds competition among possible (or at least self-perceived) candidates jockeying for position, and encourages a feeding-frenzy among those currently in high positions who fear their snouts could soon be torn from the trough.  
BURNS